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Chinese Jews

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IN the early years of this era, when by the establishment of the Pax Romana the entire Mediterranean World, as well as the Egyptian Red Sea region, was unified under the peaceful rule of the Roman Emperor, conditions of life fostered the concentration of enormous wealth in the hands of the Roman ruling class, and developed a taste for rare and exotic objects of luxury. In this connection must be mentioned the excessive craze for silk in all forms. Since silk only came from China, which was then known to Romans by the name of Seres, a great trade in silk between China and the Roman Empire was developed, and continued for some hundreds of years, until Europe, some time in the sixth century, obtained the silk-moth, and was able to produce her own silk.

The silk that was brought from China to Rome in these early years was conveyed mainly over the caravan routes of Western Asia. The first stage followed through Chang-an and Lan Chou to An-hsi, where the road divided into northern and southern routes which converged to meet again at Kashgar. From Kashgar the road proceeded almost due west by way of Samarkand to Hamadan and Baghdad, and thence to Antioch, whence the products were dispersed to different parts of the Roman Empire. In time the sea route by way of the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean, was followed. The north-western caravan roads became less used, owing possibly to the desiccation of the north-western area and the consequent encroachments of sand, though political upheavals also were factors to be borne in mind.

The silk conveyed over this caravan route was mostly close-textured, plain silk stuffs. These were not in favour among the upper classes of Rome where the fashion demanded semi-transparent silk gauzes. So the Chinese silks were unravelled and re-woven to such an extent that a large industry was developed along these lines. This is confirmed by Pliny who stated that the Seres sent to Rome "The fleecy products of their forests, and thus furnish our women with the double task of first unravelling and then reweaving the threads, and all that a Roman lady may exhibit her charms in transparent gauze". Other silk stuffs were dyed to suit Roman taste, while silk thread was mustered with wool and linen for the mixed fabrics, of which large quantities were manufactured in Syrian workshops.

In the silk trade there is no evidence of Chinese being traders out-

side of their own country, and everything indicates that the trade was mainly conducted by merchants from the west. Oftentimes these merchants were dependent upon middle-men activities of intervening tribes; but it is also clear that they passed through the border states and entered China in the capacity of embassies carrying presents and so-called tribute to the rulers of China. The official designation of "embassy" must not be taken literally, but was a euphemism to facilitate their trading operations. Likewise also the "tribute" they brought must be considered simply as presents used in the nature of bribes by the traders.

Among these traders there must have been men of the Israelitish faith, and here and there in the larger trading centres along the caravan routes there would be large and important groups of such traders, to such an extent as to make it advisable for them to maintain their synagogical worship under religious leaders. This is borne out by the fact that references to Jews are found to a limited extent in Chinese writings, and also that clay figurines used for tomb burial in the T'ang Dynasty depict non-Chinese peoples, both of classical and Semitic types. Furthermore, references to Jewish religious communities in certain cities in China proper, and particularly the data concerning the last colony of Chinese Jews at K'ai-fêng Fu, the capital of Honan Province, provide ample criteria pointing to the fact that Israelites were probably an important medium in trading relations between China and the Roman Orient from the early years of this era.

Towards the end of June in the year 1605, a Chinese scholar from the city of K'ai-fêng, called upon Père Matteo Ricci, at the headquarters of the Jesuit Mission in Peking. He said he had come to pay his respects to the Westerners since he had heard they worshipped one God, and yet were not Mohammedans. He announced himself as one of the same religion as Ricci, and the latter was impressed by the differences in the facial characteristics of his visitor as compared with ordinary Chinese. It was in the Octave of St. John the Baptist, and over the altar in the chapel had been placed an image of the Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus on one side and St. John the Baptist on the other. Seeing these figures the visitor thought they represented Rebeccah with her two sons Jacob and Esau, so he bowed and did reverence to them as Ricci did, though he stated that he was not accustomed to worship images, but wanted to show respect to the memory of the holy men of his faith. Beside the altar were pictures of the Four Evangelists. He inquired if these were not of the twelve, to which question Ricci answered in the affirmative, supposing him to be referring to the twelve apostles.

Upon their return to the guest hall, during their conversation, to Ricci's amazement he found his visitor to be a Chinese Jew, who had been talking in terms of the Old Testament entirely. Not only had the images on the altar been misunderstood, but the twelve to whom the visitor referred were found to be the twelve sons of Jacob.

The name of the visitor was Ai, afterwards found to be Ai T'ien, a native of K'ai-fêng, who according to the Hsiang-fu Hsien gazetteer had obtained his second or master's degree in the year 1573, so that at this time he would be a man of about sixty years of age. He told Ricci that the Jewish community in K'ai-fêng included many families who observed Hebrew religious practices which centred in a synagogue. The synagogue contained rolls of the Scriptures, presumably in Hebrew, and was presided over by teachers or Rabbis.

It was not until some three years later that Ricci was able to send messengers to K'ai-fêng to inquire into the facts, and the results of his investigations, as well as those of later Jesuit missionaries, were from time to time reported to Rome, and are mostly found in the volumes of the *Lettres edifiantes et curieuses* (Paris, edition, 1781).

These reports of the missionaries contained descriptions of the synagogue buildings, the communal life of the Jews, much information as to their religious observances, and described the rolls of the Hebrew Pentateuch, and other Hebrew writings, such as portions of the Old Testament and prayer manuscripts which were found in the synagogue.

The form of the synagogue was that of an ordinary Chinese temple, which included courtyard, memorial arches, pavilions, and halls and side buildings. It differed from the usual Chinese temple which normally faces south, in that the synagogue faced east, the main gateway and entrance being on the east. The most sacred part of the synagogue was the extreme west, so that the worshippers in performing their religious observances would face west in the direction of Jerusalem. In the courtyards were large stone monuments with historical inscriptions carved on them in Chinese. There were large lotus-shaped stone bowls placed in order throughout the courtyards, together with large metal incense tripods. In the central enclosure on the north side was a bathing house where ablutions were performed preparatory to taking part in the religious services. There was a slaughter house on the south, where animals required for food were killed by the synagogue authorities in a prescribed way, which was no doubt the usual Kosher method. It is an interesting fact that the name by which the Jews were known in K'ai-fêng until recently was that of the *"T'iao Chin Chiao,"* literally, "The sect or religion which plucks out the sinew," which

name no doubt was derived from their Kosher practice. Latterly the remnants of the Jews in K'ai-fêng appear to have become ashamed of the name, for Kosher practice has not been observed by them for about a hundred years at least. So the name has been changed to *"Chiao Ching Chiao"* which means "The religion that teaches the Scriptures." On the south side of the central courtyard of the synagogue was an Ancestral Hall similar to that used by Chinese, where ancestors were worshipped on anniversary occasions. It is not clear whether the Chinese Jews in the time of Ricci followed the Chinese practice of using ancestral tablets to commemorate their ancestors, but it is probable that they did, and we do know that for some generations now the descendants of these Jews have followed the custom of maintaining their ancestral tablets exactly as the Chinese do. Amongst the stone monuments there was one dated 1679, the general title of which is given as "Ancestral Hall Record," and this was probably associated with the Ancestral Hall, in the usual Chinese practice.

Up to the beginning of the Republic of China, in 1911, all Chinese temples, whatever the religion, were required to set out in the main hall of the temple, what is known as the Emperor's *Wan Sui* Tablet. In the Jews' synagogue the *Wan Sui* Tablet occupied an important position. It took the form of a large carved and gaily-painted table upon which was erected a small pavilion lacquered and gilded, and in this pavilion was the Emperor's tablet carved with dragons, and with an inscription giving the Chinese equivalent to "Long live the King."

In the Front Hall of the K'ai-fêng synagogue was a long table upon which were placed five ceremonial objects (*Wu kung*) such as were common in all authorized temples from the Ming Dynasty downward. The five objects were an incense tripod in the centre, with a candlestick and a flower vase on either side.

In this same large hall, immediately in front of the Emperor's tablet, there was a large chair called "The Chair of Moses" and it was there that the Scriptures were read and prayers offered during the religious services. Otherwise there were no objects in this hall except tablet inscriptions on the pillars and walls, and the worshippers facing the west either stood or knelt or prostrated themselves in the performance of the ceremonies. In the extreme west was the most sacred part of the synagogue, and there, in a highly decorated ark or tabernacle, were kept the thirteen rolls of the Pentateuch, each carefully enclosed in a silken cover within a gold-lacquered case, each case occupying its particular niche in the tabernacle. There were thirteen of these, twelve of them representing the twelve tribes of Israel and one designated for Moses.

The Jews, besides keeping the regular Hebrew festivals and fasts, practised circumcision, refrained from eating pork and other forbidden meats, adhered to Kosher practices, observed Saturday as the Sabbath, and also kept three periods of prayer throughout the day. In regard to the latter, it was the practice for the leader of the synagogue in calling the worshippers to prayer, to beat a resonant chime or gong of black marble. This chime is now in the Royal Ontario Museum at Toronto.

The communal cemetery of the Jews was located outside the west gate of K'ai-fêng city, the thought in mind probably being that of the direction of Jerusalem. Owing to an inundation of the Yellow River this cemetery has long since disappeared, being buried under deposits and sand dunes. There are no actual data as to when this occurred, though we may infer that it was in the year 1642 when K'ai-fêng was besieged by the rebel Li Tzu-ch'eng. In attempting to reduce the city, the Yellow River dykes were broken and the ensuing inundation was most disastrous so that the synagogue itself was destroyed and most of its Scriptures were lost. Since then, due to the general disintegration of the Jewish colony, the different families have interred their dead in separate family plots.

Apart from the reports of the Jesuit missionaries referred to above, which give reliable information concerning the K'ai-fêng Jews when they were on the point of disintegration, we have the reports of two Chinese Protestant delegates who visited the synagogue at K'ai-fêng on two different occasions, in the years 1850 and 1851.

When Bishop George Smith was appointed to Hong-Kong in 1849, he was requested by the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews to inquire into the condition of the Jews at K'ai-fêng, and funds for this purpose were placed at his disposal, which had been contributed by a lady benefactor of this Society. This lady had been moved to do this by the writings of Mr. James Finn, afterwards British Consul-General in Jerusalem, who had interested himself greatly in the matter of the Chinese Jews, and was the person mainly responsible for bringing to the notice of the English-speaking public the facts concerning the Jews. The two Chinese delegates had been selected by the missionaries in Shanghai, and set out on their journey into Honan on November 15, 1850. They journeyed north by the Grand Canal, and then at its junction with the Yellow River they proceeded due west, following the southern bank of the river, and on December 9 reached the city of K'ai-fêng. Immediately upon their arrival they put themselves in touch with the Jews, but were not favourably received,

though they were shown the Hebrew writings and were allowed to copy some of the many Chinese inscriptions which were set up in the synagogue, as well as a few of the briefer Hebrew inscriptions. They found the synagogue buildings intact, but in a dilapidated condition. The Jews had fallen on evil times, they were poor, and were unable to keep the buildings in adequate repair. None of their number understood the Hebrew writings, so no services were held, and all religious observances had ceased. There were still rolls of the Hebrew Pentateuch and other Hebrew writings; but none could read them, and the bond of their community had ceased to be a religious one, and was nothing more than that of the usual Chinese provincial guild, that is, the link of a common source of origin.

The two delegates returned to Shanghai and made their report, and the following year they were again sent to K'ai-fêng, provided with funds with which to purchase some of the Hebrew writings, if such were obtainable, and also were instructed to persuade some of the Chinese Jews to return with them to Shanghai. They were entirely successful in their mission, for they obtained six complete rolls of the Pentateuch and forty of the smaller portions of Hebrew writings, while two of the Jews were persuaded to return with them to Shanghai. This latter was in the nature of an attempt to resuscitate the Jewish colony; but although other Chinese Jews came later on to Shanghai, and were instructed in the Jewish language and religion, the results were not satisfactory, and little by little the colony dwindled and disintegrated, so that today the few remaining Jews have no religious bond, and even their historical relationships are almost forgotten.

The synagogue buildings must have been destroyed shortly after the second visit of the two Chinese delegates in 1851, for in 1866 when Dr. W. A. P. Martin made a journey from Peking to K'ai-fêng in order to inquire into the condition of the Chinese Jews, he found that the buildings had entirely disappeared and only one of the memorial stones, that of 1489, remained standing on the synagogue site. He was able to meet the leaders of the Jewish remnant, but could arouse no interest in them toward the re-establishment of their religion. He learned that most of the material of the buildings had been sold to the Mohammedans and used by them in the erection of their largest mosque, that known as the Great East Mosque. After Dr. Martin's visit different individuals from time to time have visited the K'ai-fêng Jews, but the story that each had to tell was that of an expiring community with not a ray of hope that such a community would ever be restored.

There were and still are, seven clans or branches of these Chinese

Jews, and the seven names, with one exception, are ordinary Chinese family names. These seven names are Ai, Chang, Chao, Chin, Kao, Li, and Shih. Some two hundred or more individual families are probably traceable, but their disintegration has been so extensive that hardly more than forty families know themselves to be descendants of members of "The religion which plucked the sinew," and this present generation will probably be the last to know anything about that religion.

Over thirty years ago the heads of the seven clans gave the last of their inscribed memorial stones to the Canadian Church of England Mission, and these two stones, on which were engraved three historical inscriptions, dated 1489, 1512, and 1679 respectively, were erected one on each side of the west door of Trinity Cathedral, K'ai-fêng. The inscribed tablets which hung on the pillars and walls of the synagogue have all disappeared but transcriptions have been retained.

Rolls of the Pentateuch from the K'ai-fêng synagogue, written in Hebrew on sheepskins, are now in libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, London, and other cities of Europe, and at least two of the rolls are in the United States.

Some scores of Hebrew writings from the K'ai-fêng synagogue, including Prayer Books, Scripture portions, and sundry writings, are now in the Hebrew Union College at Cincinnati, Ohio.

Most of these had been obtained by the two Chinese delegates in 1850, and among them was one which was a bilingual manuscript codex in Chinese and Hebrew. With the permission of the authorities of the Hebrew Union College, this document has been translated under the auspices of the School of Chinese Studies of the University of Toronto.

As far as is known this Codex is the only Chinese-Hebrew document that has come from the K'ai-fêng synagogue; and it seems to be the only document with Chinese script from that source. All the other documents were entirely in Hebrew script. Other than the stone inscriptions and the synagogue tablets, there was nothing in the Chinese language of a Biblical or historical character, for the Chinese of the Codex is concerned only with names of individuals, and in a few cases with their relationships, but even relationships are almost entirely given in the Hebrew. It is known that two small books descriptive of the Jewish religion were prepared in Chinese and used on occasion, with a view to meeting any possible difficulty with non-Jewish neighbours or the officials, but neither of these has survived. Several pages of the Codex are given to prayers and scriptural quotations, which are all in Hebrew; but seventy-two pages are lists of names in Hebrew and Chinese, in the form of a genealogical register.

It seems clear that the K'ai-fêng Jews adhered rigidly to the use of Hebrew in all matters concerning their religion, with the result that, when they had no leader familiar with Hebrew, their religious community came to an end. The same would doubtless have applied to Chinese Mohammedans, but the latter developed a body of Mohammedan religious literature in the Chinese language, so that their religion did not become a separate thing from their normal Chinese environment, and their Chinese adherents are now numbered in the millions.

It may never be known definitely, but there is every reason to believe that Chinese Judaism was intimately connected with Chinese Mohammedanism, and that the latter borrowed much of its terminology and its usages from the Chinese Jews, who doubtless were already established in China when the Mohammedan religion came. It is a cause for wonder that although Mohammedanism rapidly and steadily increased, so that it is today one of the great religions of China, Judaism in China, despite its long history and tenacity of existence in all other lands, has now suffered extinction.

In the register part of the Codex it would be expected that names given in Hebrew in one place would be given in Chinese in another, yet actually very few of these can be traced, perhaps some half a dozen out of the combined total of 902 men's names, that is, 465 in Hebrew and 437 in Chinese. Of the Hebrew names there might be repetitions, but the 437 Chinese names are all different individuals.

Throughout the Codex the regular Jews are recorded as sons or daughters "of Israel," while Gentiles are "of Adam," Only two men, of the Chang clan, are stated to be "sons of Adam" and these doubtless were proselytes. There were no less than 112 names of women entered as "daughters of Adam," showing that many Gentile women were brought into the Jewish community by marriage, and among these there were forty-five non-Jewish surnames, that is surnames other than the seven regular surnames.

In the matter of Hebrew names the most common among the men were Joseph, Judah, Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and Mordecai; and among the women Leah and Esther.

Some of the pages are listed almost entirely by Chinese names, and on others, as in some pages of the Ai clan, there is not a Chinese name to be found. Nevertheless the sequence of relationships may oftentimes be traced through many generations. With a knowledge of Chinese practices in the naming of sons and grandsons of respective brothers, even cousin relationships may be guessed or assumed, provided the surname and the general sequence can be determined.

In stating the sons of a certain man very often Hebrew names and Chinese names would alternate, and it was assumed that in such cases there would be both a Hebrew name and a Chinese name for an individual. This was found not to be so in any one case, and it would appear that the sons with Hebrew names were intended for service in some office connected with the religion, while the sons with Chinese names were those whose main pursuits were of a more secular trend. This is borne out somewhat by the fact that of the 465 Hebrew names of "Elders" 93 were rabbis, and of these there were 38 different Biblical names; but of the Chinese names only two are stated to be of rabbis, and these were both of the Chang clan, with no relationships given in either case.

The usefulness and value of this register of Chinese Jews are immeasurable. A dead end had been reached in the study of the Jews of China, and the only hope for further light seemed to lie in an exploration of the great mass of Chinese historical literature. Where to find a leading clue was the problem, for Chinese histories and gazetteers in no case seems to have mentioned Jews, either as individuals or as a religious sect of Chinese citizens.

From the few names on the stone inscriptions and tablets of the K'ai-fêng synagogue, it was learned that Jews had held important official posts, and their respective histories could be gathered from the gazetteers, but the generations preceding and succeeding them were unrecorded and forgotten. This Codex register has furnished a list of hundreds of names, of which sequences of many generations may be traced, and which provides clues for the searching out of the activities of Chinese Jews probably in most of the provinces of China. This initial study touches investigations in only one centre in Honan, that of K'ai-fêng, and only one set of gazetteers has been superficially skimmed, that of the K'ai-fêng county, or Hsiangfu Hsien, but from this a great amount of interesting information has become available. It is now known that Chinese Jews have held important civil and military appointments in most parts of China—Chihli, Honan, Shansi, Shensi Kansu, Kiangnan, Hukuang, Anhwei, Kiangsi, Chekiang, Fukien, Kwangtung, Yunnan, Szechwan, and Shantung—and probably further light will bring in the other provinces of China.

Nothing will better illustrate the importance of this Codex register than to describe what came to light in the tracing down of one name found in the Codex. After the translation of the Codex was made, the Hsiangfu Hsien gazetteer was searched for such names as were listed, and various groups were traced out, but one—that of the Li clan—

produced exceptional results. One name on the K'ai-fêng synagogue stone inscription of 1663 was that of Li Jung, but this name is not found in the Codex list. However it was looked up in the gazetteer, and there was found the interesting statement that because of his famous son Li Kuang-tso, Li Jung had been honoured by an appointment to the Board of Censors. Li Kuang-tso was looked up in the gazetteer, and it was learned that he was a brother of the hero Li Kuang-t'ien, who defended the city of K'ai-fêng against the rebel Li Tzu-ch'eng when the Yellow River dykes were broken in 1642, which destroyed the synagogue. Reference in the gazetteer was made to the record of this in the "Diary of the Defence of Pien" (*Shou Pien Jih Chih*), and in the large encyclopedic index called the *Ssu K'u Ch'uan Shu*. The "Diary" brought to light a genealogical table of the generations of Li which preceded Li Kuang-tso and his brothers Li Kuang-ch'i and Li Kuang-t'ien, and which followed them right down to the year 1870. Among these were names found in the Codex register preceding the inundation of K'ai-fêng, and providing an unbroken sequence from "Ephraim" of the third generation, about A.D. 1400, down to the eighteenth generation, about 1870. Of the fifteen generations, the third to the seventh are found in the Codex list; the ninth and tenth are found on the stone inscriptions and the tablets of the synagogue, one name being that of Li Kuang-tso; and the seventh to the eighteenth generations are all found in sequence in the "Diary of the Defence of Pien."

Such a find leaves one breathless, and the possibilities for following the trails and unearthing the activities of numerous Chinese Jews in a dozen provinces of China over a period of at least four hundred years opens up a wonderful vista of adventures in historical exploration.

Before an adequate synthesis on the Chinese Jews can be made, there is still considerable research work to be done. Chinese history and literature have so far provided very little knowledge of Jews in China, but the Chinese-Hebrew Codex has revealed hopeful possibilities along this line. The relations between Europe and China have been a subject of perennial interest, but an intensive inquiry of Jewish relations with China down through the centuries still awaits a pathfinder.

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